

## The Biblical Basis for Church Membership

How do we read our Bible and draw conclusions? Sometimes people become confused because they don't see the phrase "church membership" in the Bible and wonder whether it is really a biblical. But remember, just because the word "membership" is not in the Bible does not mean it is not biblical. If we took this approach in general, we could not believe in the Trinity, the hypostatic union of Christ, the intermediate state, attributes of God (omnipotence, omnipresence, omniscience, etc.), and a host of other doctrines essential to orthodox Christianity.

In the past, such an approach to the Bible has been taken by heretical sects. If the word is not found in the Bible or if there is not a Bible verse that *explicitly* says or affirms a doctrine (e.g., "Thou shalt believe the Trinity is one God and three persons"), then it cannot be biblical.

However, this is a very misguided and wooden way to read the Bible. We would never read any other type of literature this way. It treats the Bible as if it is a dictionary or DMV manual!

The Bible is made up of many different books that range in genre (history, narrative/story, poetry, law, biography, letters, etc.). At large, the Bible is one big story of redemption, and so must be read as a story rather than a dictionary or manual.

One implication, therefore, is that while we at times read very explicit, straightforward instruction (e.g., Paul's letters to new covenant churches with direct commands), at other times doctrines of our faith are derived *indirectly* from the text. In fact, most Christian doctrines are. For example, no one text teaches us that Jesus is one person with two natures (human and divine). Therefore, the Jehovah Witness or Mormon will not believe in the deity of Christ because no one text explicitly and directly teaches it. However, when we put all of Scripture together, including texts where such a doctrine is alluded to or merely insinuated, we see that the hypostatic union is a biblical doctrine. The same applies to church membership. When we look at the whole NT, even looking at what is assumed to be the case in many texts, we can conclude that church membership is a biblical concept.

One other observation: there are many things we do in life that have no mention in Scripture at all – bulletins in church, driving a car, using a cell phone, flowers in the church lobby, etc. Does this mean such things are unbiblical? Not at all. Just because something is not mentioned in Scripture, that does not preclude it from being a biblical concept or in accord with biblical wisdom. Therefore, just because something is not mentioned in Scripture does not mean it is inconsistent with Scripture. With church membership, it is alluded to and

assumed in many biblical passages (see biblical passages below). But even if it weren't, it would still be a concept that is consistent with the direct or indirect teachings of Scripture.

That said, the following is a list of 23 ways we see the *concept* of church membership alluded to or assumed in Scripture.

***Biblical Basis:***

1. In the OT, there was a very clear line of division between Israel and the world, those members of Israel and those not (Lev. 13:46, Num. 5:3, Deut. 7:3). While the church in the NT differs in many ways from OT Israel, there nevertheless are similarities. One of them is that the NT church continues to draw a distinction between those who are citizens of the church and those who are not (Matt. 18; 1 Cor. 5). Everywhere in the NT there is a clear distinction between those in the world and those in a local, visible church of believers. There is a boundary in place between the world and the church (2 Cor. 6:14; 2 Cor. 6:17).
2. Christ is very clear that to enter into the kingdom of God is to be bound and united to the church "on earth" (Matt. 16:16-19; 18:17-19). The church on earth is found in the local church.
3. The NT reports of individuals publicly and officially "added" to the local church, and the NT leaders are keeping count of who is in and who is out:
  - a. "A group numbering about a hundred and twenty" (Acts 1:15)
  - b. "Three thousand added to their number that day" (Acts 2:41)
  - c. "The Lord added to their number day by day..." (Acts 2:47)
  - d. "to about five thousand" (Acts 4:4)
4. A defined, public, official, and agreed upon group of believers
  - a. submitted themselves to the authority of their leaders (Acts 2:42-27)
  - b. together took the Lord's Supper (Acts 2:42-27)
  - c. together had fellowship with one another and shared possessions (Acts 2:42-27)
  - c. met at a certain time and place (Acts 2:42-27; 5:11-12)
  - e. met to discuss and decide matters in their specific church (Acts 6:1-2). In Corinth, for example, the church includes a specific number of Christians who are bound to the church; this becomes evident when Paul speaks of a punishment inflicted by the majority (2 Cor. 2:6).
5. Apostles, elders, and whole assemblies (local churches) publicly and officially discipline and even excommunicate those who have committed themselves to the local church but are in sin or believing false doctrine: Acts 5:1-11; 1 Corinthians 5.
6. The world and governing authorities outside the church recognize and identify specific individuals as those publicly and formally committed to local, visible churches. At times, they even make a list of specific individuals in specific churches in specific locations to persecute or bring to trial. See Acts 4:20; Acts 5:13; Acts 5:29, 42; Acts

- 8:3-4; Acts 8:14; Acts 9:10, 32, 42; Acts 10:24; Acts 12:1-2; Acts 13:12; Acts 18:8; Acts 18:17; Acts 24:26; Acts 26:24; Acts 26:28
7. Apostles and other leaders plant, visit, counsel, discipline, and preach to specific churches in specific locations, even identifying who is in certain churches: Acts 9:20-22, 27-28; Acts 9:31; Acts 11:24, 26; Acts 13:4; Acts 14:20-23; Acts 15:36-18:22; Acts 18:23-21:26
  8. Christians cooperatively and collectively classify themselves as churches, recognizing that certain people belong to a church and certain people are outside the church: Acts 8:3; Acts 11:22; Acts 11:26; Acts 12:1; Acts 12:5; Acts 14:27; Acts 14:27; Acts 15:3, 4
  9. Each local church possesses authority and power as a corporate whole when assembled together: 1 Cor. 5:4; 1 Cor. 11:18
  10. Certain acts (baptism, Lord's Supper, discipline) are to be performed by leaders of a church and approved by whole congregations. Such public actions are done by those representing a church and in the context of the church: Acts 2:38; Acts 2:41; Acts 8:12; Acts 9:18; Acts 16:33; Acts 18:8; Acts 22:16; Rom 6:3
  11. Christians in local churches publicly and officially commit themselves to serving others in their church. See Acts 2 (the entire book of Acts!); Rom 12:4-16; 1 Cor 5:11; Gal 2:11-12; 1 Tim 5:9-10; Heb 10:34; 1 Pet 4:8-11.
  12. Leaders in specific churches are made responsible and held accountable for specific people in their church(es). They are commanded to watch over those individuals who have been committed to their care. See 1 Peter 5:2; Acts 20:28
  13. Christians are commanded and one day will be held responsible for submitting to specific leaders in the church. See Heb. 13:17; 1 Tim. 5:17
  14. Churches exclude false teachers from their churches, showing that there is a specific number of those who are "in" the church in distinction from those who are "out." One cannot expel someone from a church if they do not belong to that church. Therefore, all types of church discipline assume church membership to work. See Matt. 18; 1 Cor. 5:13; Titus 3:10; 1 John 2:19
  15. A church is its membership; to talk about a local church is to talk about its members. See Acts 11:26; Acts 12:1; Acts 14:27
  16. Commands in the NT are given to local churches. Many of these commands assume church membership: John 13:34/Gal. 6:2/1 Pet. 4:10.
  17. The NT assumes that church membership is a prerequisite for the Lord's Supper: 1 Cor. 11:20-33.
  18. In Matt. 16:18-19 the apostles (and by extension the church) are given authority (keys of the kingdom) to declare who on earth is a citizen of God's kingdom and therefore the church represents his kingdom. Jesus shows what this looks like in Mat. 18:15-20 when the church is to excommunicate from its membership the unrepentant sinner.

19. In the NT, to be a Christian is to be committed to a specific local church. The NT has no category for a solo Christian or a Christian who is not committed to a local church.
20. There are no examples in the NT of individuals disconnected from the church as the normal, natural, and acceptable pattern. Individuals are always in local, visible, public churches. They are sometimes scattered because of persecution, but they always then attach themselves to a specific congregation.
21. Scripture never sets the universal church over against the local church, or the invisible church over against the visible church. One is never taught to the exclusion of the other, and never is a believer taught that his identity is to exist in one to the exclusion of the other. The two go hand in hand and are inseparable from one another. See 1 Cor. 12:13, 22, 27 where the universal church is present in the local church, which is the former's outpost.
22. Baptist churches are, by definition, congregational. Congregationalism means that final authority ultimately resides in the entire congregation, not in any one leader, set of leaders, group within the church, or external authority. However, congregationalism assumes, if it is to work at all, church membership. Apart from church membership congregationalism makes no sense and cannot function properly. To decide on matters as a church assumes Christians in that church have voting power as committed members. Those not members do not have the right to vote for they have not committed themselves to the church and therefore do not get to decide on matters of the church. Note how congregationalism is assumed in all cases of church discipline: Matt. 18; 1 Cor. 5; etc.
23. Baptists, by definition, believe in "regenerate church membership." RCM is the belief that no one is to be a member of the church unless he or she is regenerate (born again by the Spirit). State churches, in the past, assume anyone who is a citizen of the state is a citizen of the church, whether the individual is regenerate or not. And many churches that practice infant baptism (Presbyterian, Methodist, Anglican, etc.) allow the children of believers to be members in some sense of the church community even if they are unregenerate. What distinguishes Baptists is that they affirm believer's baptism (only those regenerate are to be baptized) and consequently believe only believers may be members of the church (the church is a regenerate assembly). Baptists affirm believer's baptism and RCM because it is biblical.

***What does it say to others should we neglect or reject church membership?***

It is a refusal to submit to biblical eldership and the whole church, and a refusal to be shepherded by elders God has commanded to care for his sheep.

It is to cut yourself off from the lifeline of the church, its members, its discipleship, and its marks (baptism, the Lord's Supper, and discipline).

It is an attempt to try to have Christ apart from his marital union with his bride, the church (contrary to Eph. 5). (For example: It is like telling a woman you love her, and expect all the benefits of a marriage to her, but you do not plan to marry her.)

It confuses your witness to the world, who now has every reason to think you are just part of the world.

It is to fail to take responsibility for others in the church by refusing to covenant with them and commit to them.

***Further resources:***

- Jonathan Leeman, *The Church and the Surprising Offense of God's Love: Reintroducing the Doctrines of Church Membership and Discipline*
- John S. Hammett, *Biblical Foundations for Baptist Churches: A Contemporary Ecclesiology*
- Mark Dever, *9 Marks of a Healthy Church*
- Mark Dever, *The Church: The Gospel Made Visible*
- Jonathan Leeman, *Church Membership: How the World Knows Who Represents Jesus*